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AUTHOR Harvey, Karen D.
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ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that, although the concept of teacher support groups is well accepted, their implementation is haphazard at best. Three reasons are cited: (1) Professional literature often mandates conditions for establishing support groups that are unrealistic for most schools; (2) Teachers sometimes see the support group as another obligation to be met; and (3) Some normal and predictable stages are difficult for group members to accept as productive. It is claimed that, without support groups, teachers can become lonely, tense, and burned out. A plan is suggested for establishing a nonthreatening teacher support group at the school level. An ideal group is described as consisting of between three and five volunteer members, who meet for at least one hour on a weekly basis. Group leadership should be rotated or shared, and each meeting should have both structured and unstructured elements. Suggested rules and procedures for the first four meetings are outlined, and general tips are offered. (FG)

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HELP!

FORMING A TEACHER SUPPORT GROUP

Karen D. Harvey
University of Colorado at Denver

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HELP!

FORMING A TEACHER SUPPORT GROUP

The concept of support groups is well accepted, but poorly implemented in school settings. While most teachers readily acknowledge that teaching is often a lonely profession and that the support of understanding and accepting friends and colleagues would not only bolster them as people, but undoubtedly would be a positive force in professional growth and development, they rarely consciously and specifically incorporate support groups into their school life.

The informal structure of a school will often have teacher friendships or friendship groups or even cliques that can have negative as well as positive aspects. The formal structure provides institutional faculty meetings, department or grade level groups, parent-teacher groups, and committees or task forces. At best, personal and professional support of our colleagues seems to be a haphazard affair. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we have it. Most frequently, however, it is school business as usual with little or no support. Successes and strengths are sometimes shared and sometimes hoarded, while weaknesses, frustrations, and failures are usually suppressed or hidden. The result is that teachers often become lonely, tense, and truly burned out.

Why are teachers so reluctant to actively seek what we know would be helpful in alleviating these solitary and growth inhibiting conditions? Let me suggest three influences that seem to prohibit the formation of teacher support groups and then suggest a plan that is not prohibitive and that seems workable in most school settings.

First, most of the literature and the authorities in the field discuss

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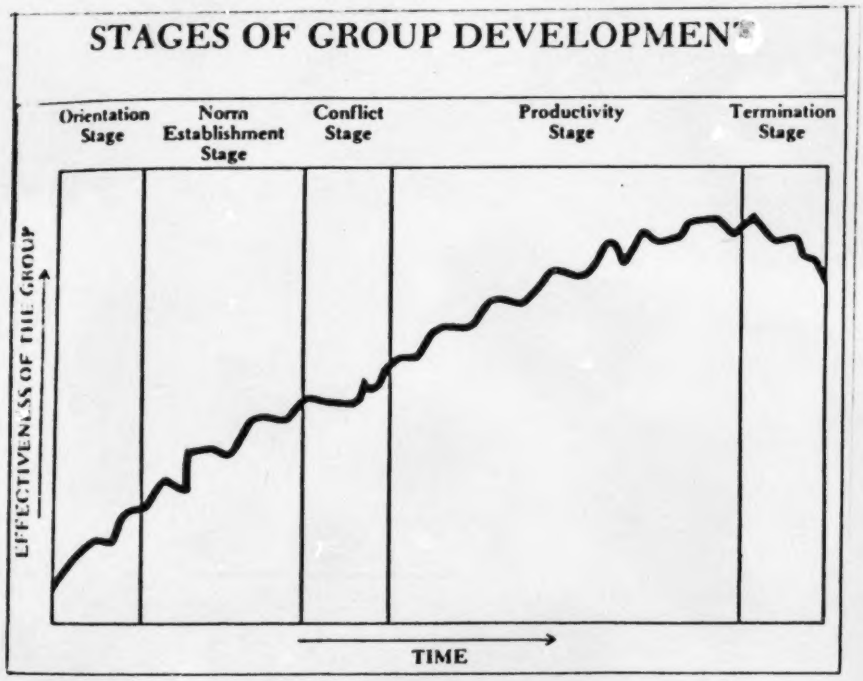
the necessity of trained leadership and expertise. A support group should have a skilled and knowledgeable leader. Yet, schools rarely have this kind of authority, and furthermore, "amateurs" are reluctant to assume this awesome responsibility. Can non-experts create and maintain an effective support group?

Second, teachers are too busy already. They often see the time required of a support group as another meeting to attend, another responsibility to assume, and another infringement on their precious time. Educators are already burdened with non-teaching tasks. Who needs one more thing to do?

And last, some of the normal and predictable stages of group formation can seem discouraging and indicative of failure if group members are not aware that these are just stages. They are inevitable and they will pass (and return). Groups will face conflict; it is normal. Any relationship that requires trust takes time, and ups and downs will occur as trust develops. Dedication and perseverance of group members are necessary to weather the stormy periods that precede the productive stages.



Stages of Group Development. (From Developing Classroom Groups by Gene Stanford. Copyright by Hart Publishing Company, 1977.) Reprinted by permission.

The following plan is suggested for the formation of teacher support groups within a school building. It is predicated on the assumptions that while skilled leadership is desirable, it is not necessary, and that while a commitment to the group is mandatory, a shared responsibility for the group can ease the work load so that the benefits of the group are greater than the drawbacks.

A contemporary poster states that none of us is as good as all of us. Together we can accomplish much and can strengthen each other. Try this approach with your friends and colleagues. You will learn new ways of relating and interacting with old acquaintances and you will discover personal meaning in the words emblazoned on the poster.

Teacher Support Groups

SIZE:

The ideal group size consists of 3-5 members.
A partnership (2) will work also.

REQUIREMENTS:

Membership must be voluntary.
Members must be committed for the stability of the group is important.

TIME:

Establish a regular time for weekly meetings. Allow at least one hour and specify a beginning and an ending time.

FORMAT:

One-third of the time should be devoted to a structured activity. This may be a "homework" assignment brought to share.
Two-thirds of the time should be spent in processing the structured activity. Why did we do this? What personal meaning did the activity have? What have I learned about myself? About others?

LEADERSHIP:

Leadership should be rotated and/or shared.

RULES:

1. Our first purpose is to support each other. Everything else we might want or need comes second.
2. We try to be as honest as possible and to express ourselves as we really are and really feel - just as much as we can.
3. We listen to everyone and insure that everyone has a turn.
4. What we say here is confidential. No one will repeat anything said here outside the group.
5. We will be non-judgmental and accept the thoughts and feelings of others as true, valid, and meaningful for them.
6. We acknowledge that we cannot solve the problems of another, but can offer help, feedback, and support.

PROCEDURE:

1. First session.

   Study and discuss stages of group formation.

2. Second session.

   Study and discuss group rules.

3. Third session.

   Discuss general rules (time, day etc.), the expectations and responsibilities of group members, and the responsibilities of the weekly leader.

4. Fourth session.

   Together plan for one group session for each group member. Assign leadership and discuss possible topics. Include one outside social event or shared experience (lunch, tennis, movie, work session etc.).

GENERAL TIPS:

1. Rules should be read, round-robin fashion at the beginning of each session.
2. Try to provide resources for the group. A suggested list of books is included in this article. These resources will suggest activities and lend support to the group.
3. Adhere strictly to the time limit.
4. Try to maintain the stability of group membership.
5. Move from:
    * impersonal issues to personal issues,
    * superficial items to significant items,
    * abstract and general statements to specific and concrete statements,
    * intellectual discussions to emotional discussions.

Many of the forces that contribute to teacher burnout are beyond the control of the teacher. But, teachers can control their response to these forces and the stress that results. We can withdraw and compound the effects of these forces or we can constructively address them and the impact that they have on us. The support of our friends is certainly something that we can actively pursue. We can cope in positive ways. Turned on is better than burned out!

RESOURCES

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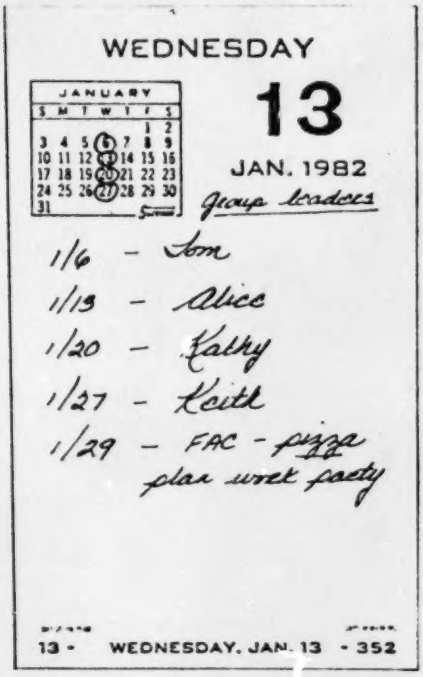
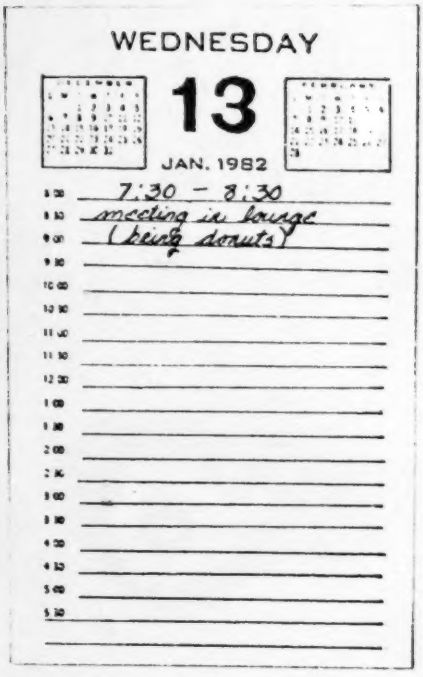
SCHEDULING:





STRUCTURED ACTIVITY:

Dear _____,

In response to your request for a letter of recommendation for my friend (put in your own name and continue)

Sincerely,

_____

From The Teacher's Copebook by Kay Winters and Marta Felber.